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ABSTRACT

This study sought to uncover the variables which account for much of the variance in life satisfaction among older residents of the Lynds' classic, sociological community setting: Middletown, USA (Muncie/Delaware County, Indiana). Data were collected in 1987 from 400 random telephone interviews with older adults (60 years of age and older). Six variables were identified from a large pool of independent variables as accounting for the vast majority of variance in life satisfaction among these older adults: subjective health status, satisfaction with home, comparative life satisfaction (now compared to when respondent was a younger adult), confidant contact, loneliness, and attitudes toward moving to a retirement home. Subjects were asked how they would describe general satisfaction with life at the present; 75 percent responded "excellent" or "good." (Data are tabulated and references are included.) (TE)

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VIEWS REGARDING HEALTH, HOME, AND OTHER INFLUENCES ON LIFE SATISFACTION IN MIDDLETOWN, U.S.A.

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ABSTRACT

The general objective of this paper is to examine life satisfaction within the classic, sociological community setting: Middletown, U.S.A. Our interest lies in uncovering those variables which account for a great deal of the variance in life satisfaction of older Middletowners. It should be noted that neither the Lynds, or later Caplow, paid much attention to older Middletowners as a significant social category.

The data were collected in November, 1987. Every year, the Department of Sociology at Ball State University conducts the Middletown Area Survey. The sample consists of 400 random phone interviews with older adults (60 years of age and older). The phone numbers are randomly generated by a computer program which selects those numbers in the same proportion of exchange and block as is extant throughout Muncie/Delaware County, Indiana (which comprises the contemporary boundaries of Middletown).

Initially, after examining a large pool of independent variables, 10 of those variables yielded R.=0.6178; R^2=0.3816. The 10 variables are: MARITAL STATUS, AGE DIFFERENCE (the difference between actual and ideal age), CONFIDANT CONTACT, COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION (life satisfaction now compared to when respondent was a younger adult), SATISFACTION WITH HOME, ATTITUDES TOWARD MOVING TO A RETIREMENT HOME, SATISFACTION WITH INCOME, SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, SEX, AND LONELINESS.

Further analysis revealed that the vast majority of that variance (R=0.6007; R^2=0.3693) was accounted for by six of the

previously mentioned independent variables: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, SATISFACTION WITH HOME, COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION, CONFIDANT CONTACT, LONELINESS, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD MOVING TO A RETIREMENT HOME. It may be worth noting that when asked, "how would you describe general satisfaction with life at the present?" 75.0 percent responded excellent or good.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Some time ago, Hoover (1976) asked, "Were There Any Older People in Middletown?" This question, of course, is directed to the Lynds' classic community studies, Middletown and Middletown in Transition. Hoover notes that the Lynds showed "scant interest in the roles or the problems of the older people in Muncie in 1924-25" (p. 11). They did make a few observations on leisure (the young dance and the old people play cards) and on older people as workers, but they did not consider older workers as being worthy of a separate study.

Hoover comments that older persons are mentioned briefly in the section on community activities and "Caring for the Unable." In Middletown in Transition, he observes that the Lynds had ample opportunity to delve into the lives of older people, but in most cases, they simply did not avail themselves of that opportunity. The reader is reminded that six categories of activity were originally chosen by the Lynds for their analysis. They were:

1. Getting a living
2. Making a home
3. Training the young
4. Using leisure
5. Engaging in religious practices
6. Engaging in community activity

Unfortunately, much of their discussion was not well organized, was descriptive and reportorial, and concentrated on church attendance. Hoover's trenchant discussion concludes as follows:

"Only the very careful reader of Middletown in Transition can discover older persons in Muncie. The Lynds are quite careless in their definition of old; they use the word in several ways and the parameters of the definition are unclear. The lifestyles of the old are not discussed; their economic progression and decline is a matter of speculation but not investigation. . . . for the Lynds, the very old seem not to be there" (p. 25).

Quite some time passed until Middletown was rediscovered in 1976 by Caplow and company. Over several years, this "specimen community" was reexamined in the context of a classic community and social change. While Caplow did not focus specifically upon older adults, some aspects of the resulting analysis and discussion did include commentary on the position of older members of the community. Incidentally, two of the more prominent topics in which Caplow dealt with older adults are family relations and religion.

SOME THOUGHTS ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

In its broader terms, the area of "subjective well-being" has been and continues to be of interest to gerontologists. Indeed, one of the many facets of this on-going attention is the fact that subjective well-being encompasses a number of

definitions, e.g., Morale, Happiness, or Life Satisfaction (George, 1979).

The general objective of this paper is to examine life satisfaction within the milieu of a classic, sociological community setting: Middletown, U.S.A. More specifically, much of our interest lies in examining the place of subjective health evaluations and life satisfaction.

While Middletown has received the attention of the Lynds and much later, Caplow and company (1982, 1983), little has been systematically written or researched regarding its older citizens per se. As such, that is where we will focus our present discussion.

Hopley noted that inconsistent use of the term (life satisfaction) by gerontologists tends to cloud the issue. The resulting confusion makes it as difficult to find the answer to the question "what is life satisfaction," as it has been to capture the elusive definition of intelligence.

Osberg et al. (1987) for example have examined "Quality of Life" which is composed of life satisfaction, satisfaction with social relationships, subjective health assessments, and satisfaction with finances. The latter three items are often employed as independent variables in analyses of life satisfaction.

Larson's oft cited work (1978) demonstrated that there are a wide variety of ways to gauge subjective well-being. The work of Hoyt and Creech (1983) and Liang (1984, 1988) have critiqued and

reevaluated classic measures such as LSIA. Diener (1984) has also extensively examined measures of subjective well-being.

Chappell and Badger's data (1989) suggest that a number of measures of social isolation, specifically measures which simply count daily or weekly contact are not particularly related to well-being. Also, they found that neither marital status, living arrangements, nor having children are linked to general satisfaction with life. However, companionship and having confidants ARE so related. They also note that major explanatory power lies in health (particularly deteriorating health resulting from chronic conditions and functional disability), income, and adequacy of income when examining those variables which contribute to quality of life for older adults.

One other arena of life which deserves mentioning is housing; as Atchley (1987) notes, housing is a significant source of continuity in the lives of most middle and older aged persons. That is, Atchley tells us that housing is more than just a place to reside; it may be symbolic of personal autonomy, a place of family gatherings, a fount of pleasant memories, and nexus with neighborhood and community. To use a classic phrase, housing or the home has considerable "sentiment and symbolism" for the older individual. Indeed, the 1971 White House Conference on Aging asserted that with exception of spouse, housing was probably the most salient element in the life of the older adult.

With regard to accounting for a sense of well-being, the literature seems to indicate that in varying degrees, health makes a major contribution, as does income and quality of contact

and interaction, and level of social activities. The influence of sex is still debated. Usui, Keil, and Durig (1985) found that a significant component of life satisfaction for older adults is how well off an individual feels as compared to someone to whom he or she feels close. Life satisfaction seemed to be more affected by relative income than health or social participation. However, it should be noted that relative income, household size, social participation, sex, and health were all significant variables in explaining life satisfaction among older adults in that study.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data were obtained from 400 telephone interviews with respondents who were 60 or older (for those interested in the relative merits of different interview approaches, see Leinbach, 1982). A "Middletown Area Survey" is conducted annually by the Department of Sociology at Ball State University. The sample was selected by computer, utilizing a program which chooses phone numbers based on the proportion of exchanges and blocks which are in service throughout the Muncie/Delaware County area. This comprises the boundaries of contemporary Middletown.

Once contact was made with a household, a filter item was asked to determine if anyone in that household was 60 years of age or older. If an older adult was present, we proceeded to conduct the interview. If not, the ineligible respondent was thanked for their time and inconvenience, and the next number on the list was then called.

A number of the items in the instrument were taken from either Caplow's Middletown III study (the Kinship Survey) or the Commission on Aging Survey, a complete copy of which may be found in Babbie (1986). Some of the items were slightly modified for use in a telephone survey. For the sake of parsimony, life satisfaction was assessed by a single-item measure. Diener (1984) has noted that despite the advantage of brevity, there are some legitimate concerns about single-item measures. On the other hand, such measures usually correlate with external variables and do not seem to be especially contaminated by social desirability. As Deiner noted, the validity and reliability of the "single-item scale" is such that they are adequate if a very brief measure of global well-being is what the researcher requires. The final instrument was subjected to a pilot test before the data collection process was begun. The general characteristics of the sample are seen in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

OBSERVATIONS

How do these older adults evaluate their levels of interaction with family, friends, and neighbors? Is there a pervasive sense of loneliness abroad in the land?

(Insert Table 2 Here)

It would appear that older Middletowners visit a good deal. Almost 79.0 percent visit with a friend or neighbor at least once a week. Some 65.0 percent visit everyday or a few times a week.

The responses shown in Table 3 indicate that a vast majority (76.0 percent) of older Middletowners have contact with someone they trust or in whom they can confide.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

Does life in general inflict a pervasive sense of loneliness upon our subjects? The data in Table 4 would say "no." When asked how often they feel lonely, 59.0 percent responded "never or hardly ever," about 17.0 percent said "fairly often," "very often or always."

(Insert Table 4 here)

Table 5 portrays levels of satisfaction with life and health. On life satisfaction, 75.0 percent responded Excellent or Good. Nearly 64.0 percent stated that the health was Excellent or Good.

(Insert Table 5 Here)

The degree of "Comparative Life Satisfaction" is seen in Table 6. Comparative life satisfaction is a more temporal measure; that is, we were interested in not only life satisfaction at this point in time, but also in an assessment of now as compared to the past (young adulthood). Almost 37.0 percent said that they were more satisfied now than when they were young adults; 37.0 percent said, about the same; and slightly over 25.0 percent said that they were less satisfied.

(Insert Table 6 Here)

Finally, we asked about level of satisfaction with income. The data in Table 7 shows that a little over 80.0 percent of the sample answered that their income was at least adequate for their

needs. This subjective assessment of income will be used in the following analysis rather than amount of income in dollars. Satisfaction with income showed a much stronger correlation at the zero order and in the multiple regression analysis than did actual income.

(Insert Table 7 Here)

As may be seen in Table 8, most (66.8 percent of those responding) indicate being very satisfied with the home in which they currently live.

(Insert Table 8 Here)

Almost 89.0 percent of older Middletowners surveyed have never seriously considered moving into a retirement complex (see Table 9).

(Insert Table 9 Here)

With regard to difference between actual and ideal age (AGEDIF), nearly 49.0 percent of those responding expressed no desired difference; however practically 46.0 percent desired to be 20 years or more YOUNGER than they were at the time this study was conducted (see Table 10).

(Insert Table 10 Here)

Table 11 contains the zero-order correlations between life satisfaction and the original 10 independent variables.

(Insert Table 11 Here)

Initially, after examining a large pool of independent variables, 10 of those variables yielded $R.=0.6178$; $R^2=0.3816$. The 10 variables are: MARITAL STATUS, AGE DIFFERENCE (the difference between actual and ideal age), CONFIDANT CONTACT,

COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION (life satisfaction now compared to when respondent was a younger adult), SATISFACTION WITH HOME, ATTITUDES TOWARD MOVING TO A RETIREMENT HOME, SATISFACTION WITH INCOME, SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, SEX, AND LONELINESS.

Further analysis revealed that the vast majority of that variance ($R=0.6007$; $R^2=0.3693$) was accounted for by six of the previously mentioned independent variables: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, SATISFACTION WITH HOME, COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION, CONFIDANT CONTACT, LONELINESS, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD MOVING TO A RETIREMENT HOME. Health status shows the strongest single direct effect upon life satisfaction.

The model in Figure 1 shows the interrelationships between the independent variable of life satisfaction and all ten independent variables, which includes age, sex, marital status, and satisfaction with income.

(Insert Figure 1 Here)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the main, the older adult respondents in Middletown appear to have high levels of contact and interaction. Also, they indicate to be rather satisfied with life now, and with life now as compared to the past, as well as with their income. Levels of loneliness tend to be on the low side.

They appear to be satisfied with their current homes, have not seriously considered moving into a retirement complex and a rather bi-modal distribution with regard to what age they would prefer to be.

From the analysis in Figure 1, those who perceive their health as being better, who are at least as satisfied with life now as compared to when they were younger, are more satisfied with their home and less likely to have considered moving into a retirement complex, are less lonely and have sufficient contact with a confidant. Those for whom life is seen as more comfortable, pleasant, having continuity, integrated, and meaningful, not too surprisingly, appear to express higher levels of life satisfaction.

Those who express a greater desire to be younger have lower subjective health assessments, and males tend to be the ones who express a somewhat greater wish to be younger (a modicum of macho, perhaps?). It is worth noting that sex is tied not only to desired age, but also to martial status which, as will be noted, plays an important role in its relationship to other variables. Satisfaction with income has a positive tie with personal judgements of health.

Respondents who have not given much serious thought to moving into a retirement complex are more satisfied with their homes. Having sufficient contact with a confidant, sufficient income, and less desire to be younger seems to be linked to satisfaction with one's domicile.

Respondents who are at least as satisfied with life now as when they were younger have less desire to be younger, are married (which is a more likely status for males), and less lonely. Older Middletowners who perceive themselves as in better health, are more satisfied with their home, are married, and have

sufficient confidant contact express less loneliness. Finally, better health, being married, and less desire to be younger have some significant effect on confidant contact.

It seems, then, that those older Middletowners whose life situations exhibit characteristics which contribute to order, stability, and continuity (both internal and external) are those who express higher levels of life satisfaction. As Atchley (1989, p. 183) noted when examining Continuity Theory,

> As a result of both their own perceptions and pressures from social environment, individuals who are adapting to normal aging are both predisposed and motivated toward inner psychological continuity as well as outward continuity of social behavior and circumstances. Continuity theory views both internal and external continuity as robust adaptive strategies that are supported by both individual preference and social sanctions.

And thus it may be for the good people of Middletown, U.S.A.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of the Sample

MARITAL STATUS	N	Percent
Married	211	52.8
Widowed	145	36.3
Separated/Divorced	31	7.8
Never Married	13	3.3
TOTAL	400	100.0

AGE OF RESPONDENT		
60-64	121	30.5
65-69	103	25.9
70-74	72	18.1
75-79	59	14.9
80-84	30	7.6
85 and over	12	3.0
TOTAL	397	100.0

LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
No High School	65	16.3
Some High School	87	21.9
H.S. Grad/Trade Sh	152	38.2
Some College	26	6.5
College Grad or More	68	17.1
TOTAL	398	100.0

NUMBER OF LIVING CHILDREN	N	Percent
None	65	16.3
One	66	16.5
Two	93	23.3
Three	78	19.5
Four	43	10.8
Five	17	4.3
Six	19	4.8
Seven or more	19	4.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

SEX OF RESPONDENT		
Male	133	33.3
Female	267	66.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
$0-4,999	42	13.0
$5,000-9,999	96	29.6
$10,000-14,999	55	17.0
$15,000-19,999	35	10.8
$20,000 and over	96	29.6
TOTAL	324	100.0

Table 2: How Often Did Respondent Visit In Person With Friends or Neighbors Last Week?

	N	Percent
Everyday	67	16.8
A Few Times a Week	194	48.6
Once a Week	53	13.3
Not At All	85	21.3
TOTAL	399	

Table 3: Does Respondent Have as Much Contact As They Wish With Someone They Trust or Confide In?

	N	Percent
Yes	299	75.5
No	97	24.5
TOTAL	396	

Table 4: How Often Does Respondent Find Themselves Feeling Lonely?

	N	Percent
Never or Hardly Ever	236	59.3
Sometimes	94	23.6
Fairly Often	28	7.0
Very Often or Always	10	10.1
TOTAL	398	

Table 5: Respondent's Life Satisfaction and General Health

	Excellent		Good		Fair		Poor	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How would you describe your general satisfaction with life at the present?	106	26.6	194	48.7	85	21.4	13	3.3
Would you say that your health today is:	88	22.0	166	41.5	111	27.8	35	8.8

Table 6: Comparative Life Satisfaction Over Time

	More Satisfied		About the Same		Less Satisfied		Don't Know	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Looking back, would you say that you are more or less satisfied with life <u>now</u> than when you were a young adult?	143	36.8	144	37.0	99	25.4	3	0.8

Table 7: Degree of Satisfaction with Income

	Very Well		Well		Adequately		Not Very Well		Barely	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How well do you think your income and assets meet your financial needs?	58	14.7	82	20.8	177	44.8	53	13.4	25	6.3

Table 8: The Home you Currently Live in? Are You . . .

	N	%
Not at all satisfied	7	1.8
Not too satisfied	21	5.3
Somewhat satisfied	105	26.3
Very satisfied	267	66.8

Table 9: Have You Ever Seriously Considered Moving Out of Your Present Home Into a Retirement Complex?

	N	%
Yes	44	11.5
No	340	88.5

Table 10: Difference Between Actual and Ideal Age

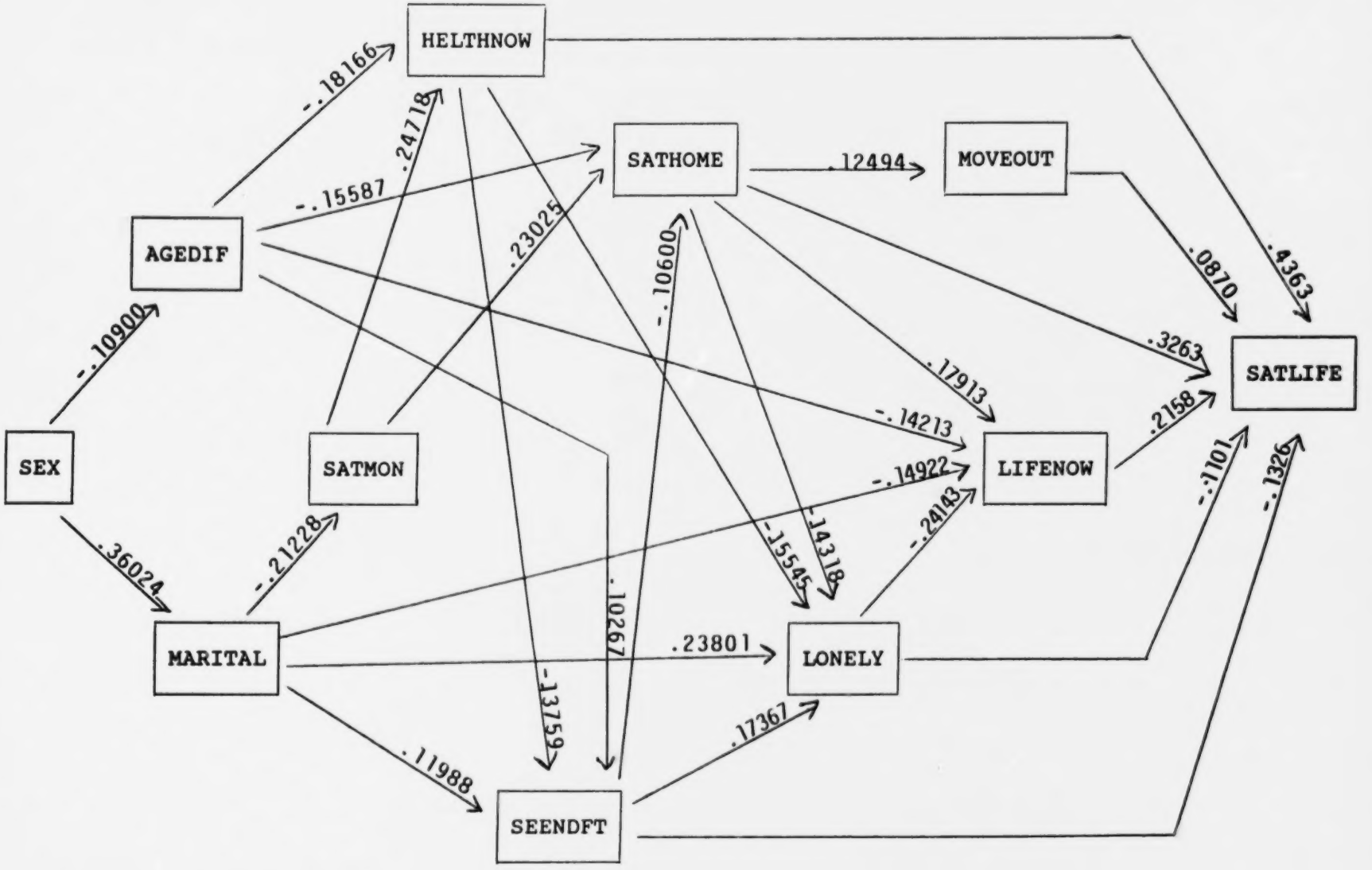
	N	%
No difference	194	48.9
Up to 19 or less	21	5.3
Up to 39 or less	84	21.2
More than 40	98	24.7

Table 11: Zero Order Correlation Between Life Satisfaction and Independent Variables

	SATLIFE	HELTHNOW	SATHOME	LIFENOW	LONELY	SATMON	SEENOFT	AGEDIF	MARITAL	MOVEOUT
HELTHNOW	.436***									
	.000									
SATHOME	.391***	.169***								
	.000	.001								
LIFENOW	.360***	.192***	.286***							
	.000	.000	.000							
LONELY	-.332***	-.235***	-.240***	-.349***						
	.000	.000	.000	.000						
SATMON	.285***	.248***	.267***	.162**	-.202***					
	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000					
SEENOFT	-.261***	-.164***	-.172***	-.149**	.247***	-.150**				
	.000	.001	.001	.002	.000	.002				
AGEDIF	-.235***	-.213***	-.200***	-.220***	.143**	-.032	.145**			
	.000	.000	.000	.000	.003	.276	.003			
MARITAL	-.196***	-.091*	-.140**	-.252***	.297***	-.198***	.128**	.048		
	.000	.044	.004	.000	.000	.000	.008	.184		
MOVEOUT	.152**	.032	.127**	.051	-.072	.029	-.084	.014	.038	
	.002	.276	.009	.170	.088	.290	.058	.395	.238	
SEX	-.057	-.042	-.055	-.058	.097*	-.051	-.004	-.095*	.346***	-.065
	.144	.214	.153	.137	.034	.169	.467	.037	.000	.111

CORRELATION, SIGNIFICANCE
SIGNIFICANCE: * .050 ** .010 ***.001

FIGURE 1



R=.6178 R^2=.3816
ALL BETAS SIG. AT .05 OR LESS

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